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PARIS FOR WALLER, LONDON FOR TSOU, PRM/FO, NEA/ELA

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SUBJECT: VISITING A/S SAUERBREY MEETS WITH SYRIA'S DEPUTY FM

REF: DAMASCUS 0229

CLASSIFIED BY: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES WILLIAM ROEBUCK FOR REASONS 1.4 B/D

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: VISITING ASSISTANT SECRETARY SAUERBREY MET FOR AN HOUR MARCH 12 WITH SYRIAN DEPUTY FM FAISAL MIKDAH IN DAMASCUS, FOLLOWED BY A LUNCH HOSTED BY MIKDAH. DURING THE MEETING, THE DFM NOTED SYRIAN SATISFACTION WITH THE VISIT AND DISCUSSED HOW THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT WAS ADDRESSING THE INFLUX OF IRAQIS, INCLUDING COOPERATION WITH UNHCR AND TALKS WITH THE IRAQI GOVERNMENT. MIKDAH NOTED THAT THE SARG HAD URGED IRAQI OFFICIALS TO DO MORE TO HELP DISPLACED IRAQIS IN SYRIA, INCLUDING OFFERING THEM THE OPTION OF EXPANDING SERVICES AT THE IRAQ EMBASSY IN DAMASCUS. HE EXPRESSED CAUTION THAT THE SARG COULD BE TARGETED BY ELEMENTS AFFILIATED WITH AL-QAIDA-IN-IRAQ PRESENT IN SYRIA, IF THE VIOLENCE CONTINUED THERE. AT VARIOUS TIMES IN THE MEETING, MIKDAH ALLUDED TO THE NEED FOR MORE DIALOGUE WITH THE U.S. BUT NEVER PRESSED THE SUBJECT. DURING THE MEETING, A/S SAUERBREY STRESSED THAT HERS WAS A HUMANITARIAN MISSION, NOT INVOLVED IN OTHER POLITICAL ISSUES. DURING HER MARCH 11-13 VISIT TO DAMASCUS, A/S SAUERBREY ALSO ATTENDED A UNHCR BRIEFING ON IRAQI REFUGEES, A UNHCR-SPONSORED ROUNDTABLE WITH ITS FOUR IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS IN SYRIA, A BRIEFING HOSTED BY THE U.S. CHARGE FOR RESIDENT AMBASSADORS AND UNHCR OFFICIALS INCLUDING VISITING DIRECTOR OF INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION GEORGE OKOTH-OBBO, AND A DINNER HOSTED BY THE U.S. CHARGE FOR REPRESENTATIVES FROM UN AGENCIES AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN SYRIA (REPORTED SEPTEL). END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) VISITING ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR POPULATION, REFUGEES AND MIGRATION ELLEN SAUERBREY MET FOR AN HOUR MARCH 12 WITH SYRIAN DEPUTY FM FAISAL MIKDAH AT THE MFA. OTHER SYRIANS ATTENDING THE MEETING INCLUDED THE DIRECTOR OF THE MFA'S DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, DR. MUHAMMED FAYSAL AL-HAMWI, WHO HAD MET IMMEDIATELY PRIOR TO THE MEETING WITH VISITING UNHCR DIRECTOR OF INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION GEORGE OKOTH-OBBO AND LOCAL UNHCR OFFICIALS.

¶3. (C) OPENING REMARKS: MIKDAH OPENED THE CONVERSATION BY NOTING SYRIAN SATISFACTION WITH THE VISIT, SAYING, "WITH PERSEVERANCE, WE CAN WORK THROUGH OUR COMMON PROBLEMS." THE A/S USED HER OPENING COMMENTS TO RECOGNIZE SARG ASSISTANCE TO DISPLACED IRAQIS HERE AND TO SEEK THE GOVERNMENT'S CONTINUED COMMITMENT FOR IRAQIS TO ENTER THE COUNTRY AND REMAIN WITHOUT ARREST OR DEPORTATION AS PERMITTED BY INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS. SHE ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THE IRAQI PRESENCE PLACED A BURDEN ON DOMESTIC SYRIAN RESOURCES AND SOCIAL SERVICES. SHE CALLED FOR SARG FLEXIBILITY IN ALLOWING UNHCR TO WORK WITH ORGANIZATIONS SUCH AS THE SYRIAN ARAB RED CRESCENT AND THE INTERNATIONAL OFFICE FOR MIGRATION. SAUERBREY PRESSED FOR

CONTINUED SUPPORT FOR UNRWA, WHICH AS A PART OF ITS MANDATE FOCUSES ON THE 500,000 PALESTINIAN REFUGEES RESIDING IN SYRIA, AS WELL AS THE 350 IRAQI PALESTINIANS IN THE NO-MAN'S-LAND BETWEEN SYRIA AND IRAQ. A/S SAUERBREY CLOSED BY STRESSING THAT HERS WAS A HUMANITARIAN MISSION NOT INVOLVED IN OTHER POLITICAL ISSUES.

14. (C) THE DIMENSIONS OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS: MIKDAD FOCUSED ON THE ISSUE OF IRAQI REFUGEES. HE CHARACTERIZED THE INFLUX OF IRAQIS INTO SYRIA AS SECOND IN SCOPE WORLDWIDE ONLY TO THE 1948 EXODUS OF PALESTINIANS, WHICH HAD RESULTED IN THE PRESENCE OF 500,000 PALESTINIAN REFUGEES IN SYRIA. THE IRAQ CONFLICT WAS HAVING A PROFOUND IMPACT ON SYRIA, AND THE GOVERNMENT WAS WORRIED ABOUT AN ESCALATION IN IRAQI VIOLENCE, MIKDAD SAID. "EACH TIME WE SEE A NEW SECURITY PLAN IN IRAQ, WE SEE MORE IRAQI'S FLEEING TO SYRIA," CLAIMED MIKDAD, NOTING, "YOU'RE TAKING ONLY 7,000 IRAQIS, WHILE WE HAVE MORE THAN A MILLION." REGARDING THE NEED FOR SARG FLEXIBILITY IN ALLOWING IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS FOR UNHCR, MIKDAD STATED THAT THE SARG PREFERRED WORKING WITH THE UN FAMILY OF ORGANIZATIONS. IT FOUND IT MUCH MORE DIFFICULT TO SHOW FLEXIBILITY ON THE SUBJECT OF NGO'S BUT WAS WILLING TO CONSIDER IT. HE NOTED THAT THE SARG, DESPITE ITS RESERVATIONS, WOULD ALLOW SOME RELIGIOUSLY-AFFILIATED NGO'S TO OPERATE, ON THE CONDITION THAT NO PROSELYTIZING TAKES PLACE AND THAT THE NGOS RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION IS REPRESENTED IN THE LOCAL SYRIAN POPULATION.

15. (C) IN THE PAST, THE U.S. AND SYRIA HAD COOPERATED WELL ON SECURITY, BUT A LACK OF U.S. RECOGNITION FOR SYRIA'S COOPERATION HAD PROMPTED SYRIA TO END THE RELATIONSHIP IN MID-2005, MIKDAD ASSERTED. HE LAUDED SYRIAN AND U.S. PRESENCE AT THE MARCH 10 BAGHDAD CONFERENCE, NOTING THAT SYRIA LOOKED FORWARD TO SIMILAR OPPORTUNITIES IN THE FUTURE. "SOMETIMES ON ISSUES LIKE IRAQ, WE ARE NOT ALLOWED TO PLAY A ROLE," MIKDAD CLAIMED, ADDING, "IF WE WORK TOGETHER, WE CAN FIND A LOT OF SOLUTIONS." HE FOCUSED ON THE ISSUE OF REFUGEES, SAYING "YOU'RE FOUR YEARS TOO LATE, BUT YOU'RE HERE NOW AND WE'RE HAPPY."

16. (C) PRESENCE OF IRAQIS INCREASINGLY FELT IN SYRIA: MIKDAD SPOKE AT LENGTH ABOUT HOW THE ESTIMATED 1.4 MILLION DISPLACED IRAQIS HERE AFFECT THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC. (NOTE: WHILE SOME SYRIANS WITH PAN-ARAB SYMPATHIES GENERALLY REFER TO ARABS AS "BROTHERS," MIKDAD SAID HE WOULD NOT QUIBBLE ABOUT TERMS, OFTEN REFERRING TO THE IRAQIS AS REFUGEES. END NOTE.) THE INFLUX OF IRAQIS--OF WHICH 71 PERCENT RESIDED IN AND AROUND DAMASCUS--HAD BEEN ACCOMPANIED BY INCREASED LEVELS OF PROSTITUTION BY YOUNG GIRLS AND WOMEN AS WELL OTHER CRIMES, INCLUDING KIDNAPPING, HE SAID. THE INFLUX HAD ALSO CONTRIBUTED TO A 35 PERCENT HIKE IN THE PRICE OF GOODS, INCLUDING GREATLY INCREASING THE COSTS OF SARG SUBSIDIZED ITEMS SUCH AS SUGAR, BREAD, RICE AND DIESEL, AS WELL AS CAUSING SKYROCKETING RENTS, HE SAID. ADDITIONALLY, THE 75,000 IRAQI CHILDREN ATTENDING SYRIAN ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY PUBLIC SCHOOLS HAD LED TO INCREASED CLASSROOM SIZE, PROMPTING COMPLAINTS FROM THE SYRIAN PUBLIC, MIKDAD STATED. (NOTE: REFTTEL REPORTED ONLY 28,000 IRAQI CHILDREN IN SYRIAN SCHOOLS, WHICH SUGGESTED THAT MANY MORE IRAQI CHILDREN IN SYRIA THAN PREVIOUSLY EXPECTED WERE NOT ATTENDING SCHOOL. END NOTE.)

17. (C) SYRIAN RESPONSE TO THE INFLUX: THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT HAD DONE AND WOULD CONTINUE TO MAKE A CONCERTED EFFORT TO SUPPORT DISPLACED IRAQIS IN SYRIA, MIKDAD STATED. HE NOTED THAT THE SARG CONTINUED TO ALLOW IRAQIS ACCESS TO PUBLIC MEDICAL FACILITIES, ALTHOUGH THEY WERE REQUIRED TO PAY FOR 50 PERCENT OF THEIR TREATMENT. THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT ALSO APPRECIATED UNHCR EFFORTS HERE AND ESPECIALLY THE FEBRUARY VISIT TO SYRIA OF THE UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES ANTONIO GUTERRES, MIKDAD SAID. SEPARATELY, THE SARG WAS READY TO COOPERATE WITH THE IRAQI GOVERNMENT TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF ITS DISPLACED CITIZENS, SAID MIKDAD, NOTING THAT THIS HAD BEEN DISCUSSED DURING THE WEEK-LONG VISIT IN MID-JANUARY OF IRAQI PRESIDENT JALAL TALABANI. THE SARG WOULD WELCOME FOR EXAMPLE, IRAQI-FINANCED HOSPITALS AND SCHOOLS IN SYRIA TO SUPPORT THE NEEDS OF IRAQIS HERE, SAID MIKDAD, ADDING HE HAD ALSO SUGGESTED TO TALABANI AND HIS

DELEGATION THE ADDITION OF A SECTION IN THE IRAQ EMBASSY TO ADDRESS SPECIFIC NEEDS OF IRAQI REFUGEES. SO FAR, IRAQI OFFICIALS HAD NOT RESPONDED, HE SAID.

18. (C) CONCERNS ABOUT SPILLOVER VIOLENCE: AT THE SAME TIME THAT THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT WAS WILLING TO ASSIST, HOWEVER, IT HAD LEGITIMATE SECURITY CONCERNS ABOUT DISPLACED IRAQIS, HE SAID. HE ALLUDED AT ONE POINT TO SARG CONCERNS THAT IT COULD BE TARGETED BY ELEMENTS AFFILIATED WITH AL-QAIDA-IN-IRAQ PRESENT IN SYRIA, IF THE VIOLENCE CONTINUED THERE. HE ALSO NOTED THAT "IF TERRORIST OPERATIONS FINISH IN IRAQ, THEY WILL TURN TO SYRIA NEXT." AT VARIOUS TIMES IN THE MEETING, MIKDAD ALLUDED TO THE NEED FOR MORE DIALOGUE WITH THE U.S. BUT NEVER PRESSED THE SUBJECT. THESE CONCERNS HAD PROMPTED SYRIAN MEASURES IMPOSED IN JANUARY TO LIMIT THE STAYS OF DISPLACED IRAQIS BUT RETRACTED A MONTH LATER, MIKDAD SAID. AND ALTHOUGH THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY FAILED TO ACKNOWLEDGE PROPERLY SYRIA ASSISTANCE TO IRAQIS, IT WAS QUICK TO CRITICIZE SARG EFFORTS TO RESPOND TO ITS OWN SECURITY CONCERNS, MIKDAD STATED. THE REACTION, CLAIMED MIKDAD, WAS SIMILAR TO THE U.S. APPROACH TOWARD SYRIAN COOPERATION ON SECURITY ISSUES. "WHEN 10 PEOPLE MOVED CLANDESTINELY TO IRAQ AND SYRIA--DESPITE OUR HAVING ARRESTED THOUSANDS--THE WHOLE WORLD WAS TOLD THAT SYRIA IS SUPPORTING TERRORISM," HE SAID. ONCE PEACE AND STABILITY RETURN TO IRAQ, THE SARG FERVENTLY HOPED THAT ALL IRAQIS WOULD RETURN TO THEIR CITIES AND VILLAGES, MIKDAD SAID.

19. (C) VULNERABLE PALESTINIANS: RESPONDING TO A/S SAUERBREY'S OPENING COMMENTS ABOUT EFFORTS TO ASSIST A PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE POPULATION OF PALESTINIANS STUCK AT THE BORDER WITH SYRIA. MIKDAD STATED THAT IRAQI AND COALITION FORCES HAD A RESPONSIBILITY TO PROVIDE SECURITY FOR THEM IN IRAQ. ISRAEL SHOULD ALSO SHOULDER ITS RESPONSIBILITY AND PERMIT THESE PALESTINIANS TO RETURN TO THEIR HOMELAND, MIKDAD SAID. IT WAS NOT APPROPRIATE TO PRESSURE SYRIA, LEBANON OR JORDAN TO TAKE IN MORE PALESTINIANS, HE CLAIMED. THE A/S INTERJECTED THAT THESE MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN STRANDED IN EXTREMELY DIFFICULT CONDITIONS IN THE NO-MANS-LAND, WITHOUT ADEQUATE ACCESS TO FOOD, WATER AND EDUCATION, NEEDED MUCH MORE IMMEDIATE RELIEF.

110. (C) A/S SAUERBREY'S MEETING WAS FOLLOWED BY A LUNCH IN THE OLD CITY HOSTED BY MIKDAD, ALSO ATTENDED BY HAMWI AND BASSAM SABBAGH, THE OFFICE DIRECTOR FOR SYRIAN FM WALID MU'ALLIM. A/S SAUERBREY DECLINED AN OFFER BY MIKDAD, CONVEYED TO THE CHARGE AFTER THE MFA MEETING, FOR A FOLLOW-ON APPOINTMENT WITH SYRIAN FM WALID MU'ALLIM. DURING HER MARCH 11-13 VISIT TO DAMASCUS, A/S SAUERBREY ALSO ATTENDED A UNHCR BRIEFING ON IRAQI REFUGEES, A UNHCR-SPONSORED ROUNDTABLE WITH ITS FOUR IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS IN SYRIA, A BRIEFING HOSTED BY THE U.S. CHARGE FOR RESIDENT AMBASSADORS AND LED BY A/S SAUERBREY AND OKOTH-OBBO, AND A DINNER HOSTED BY THE U.S. CHARGE FOR REPRESENTATIVES FROM UN AGENCIES AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN SYRIA (SEE SEPTTEL).

111. (U) THIS CABLE WAS NOT CLEARED BY A/S SAUERBREY OR HER PARTY BEFORE THEY DEPARTED SYRIA.
ROEBUCK